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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000704

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SUBJECT: ROMANIAN REACTION TO COMBAT DEATH OF SOLDIER IN  
IRAQ - SORROW AND REGRET, BUT STAYING THE COURSE

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Mark Taplin  
for Reasons 1.4 (a), (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. The Romanian government has pledged to maintain its troop presence in Iraq in the wake of its first-ever combat death there. President Traian Basescu described the fallen soldier as among the pantheon of Romanian heroes, a sentiment widely shared by other political leaders and ordinary citizens. The Ambassador publicly expressed sorrow at Hancu's death and gratitude for Romania's role in the global war on terror, attending with the Defense and Army Attaches the ceremony marking the return of the soldier's remains to Romania. Although some commentators have criticized Romania's role in Iraq, few mainstream voices in the media are calling for a withdrawal of Romanian troops.  
End Summary.

Solidarity in Time of Loss...Staunch Iraq Commitment

12. (SBU) Reacting to the death of Romanian corporal Bogdan Hancu, killed April 27 along with three Italian soldiers when a roadside bomb ripped through their convoy in southern Iraq, Romanian President Traian Basescu declared that Hancu was "among the ranks of Romania's heroes who put their lives at risk day after day, taking action where terrorism represents a daily reality." Basescu also offered condolences to Hancu's family. A brief, but eloquent, statement on the Presidency's website iterates the President's comments, noting that the President is in solidarity with Hancu's family in "the irreparable loss which it has suffered." (Note: As several Romanian media sources stated April 28, President Basescu has repeatedly reaffirmed his unwavering commitment to maintaining Romania's troop presence in Iraq.  
End Note.)

13. (SBU) In his statement on behalf of the GOR condemning the attack and expressing condolences, Prime Minister Calin Popescu-Tariceanu underscored that Romanian troops will not withdraw from Iraq. The Defense Ministry's condolences statement expressed "appreciation for the devotion with which Romanian warriors carry out their missions and we stand beside them." The MOD posthumously promoted Hancu to lieutenant junior grade and decorated him.

14. (C) Senate Defense Committee President and center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) foreign policy strategist George Cristian Maior publicly stressed that Romania should not evaluate its Iraq troop presence "emotionally" and in the wake of sorrow at Hancu's death. He observed that Romania's decision to commit troops to Iraq (initially made when Maior was MOD State Secretary) was based on a calculation of

Romania's strategic interests at the time. In his statement, Maior described the Romania-US strategic partnership as "very important." At the same time, he expressed support for parliamentary discussion about Romania's presence in Iraq and, while not calling for a withdrawal of troops, stated that Romania should develop a calendar focusing on eventual withdrawal from Iraq. The PSD also issued a statement of condolences to Hancu's family.

15. (SBU) The Ambassador's public statement of sorrow at Hancu's death and praise for Romania as a "brave and trustworthy ally...in the war on terror" received wide media coverage, as did condolence statements by the Italian and British Ambassadors. The Ambassador accompanied by the Defense Attache and the Army Attache, along with Basescu, Defense Minister Atanasiu, the Italian Charge and the British Deputy Head of Mission, participated in a short ceremony April 27 at Bucharest's airport marking the arrival of Corporal Hancu's remains in Romania. The Embassy is preparing condolence letters for Hancu's family.

"Fruit Picker" or Hero?  
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16. (C) Media reported that Hancu's mother and father were reserve military officers, and some sources quoted Hancu's mother as calling for the withdrawal of Romanian troops from Iraq "because our children die senselessly there." She told journalists she had encouraged her son not to volunteer for Iraq service.

17. (C) Romanian Press Club President Cristian Tudor Popescu, who has in the past expressed anti-U.S. views, penned a bitter April 28 editorial in national daily "Gandul" in which he mocked Basescu's characterization of Hancu as a hero. According to Popescu's editorial, titled "The Romanian Army

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Strawberry Pickers," Romanian soldiers who serve in Iraq or Afghanistan are, like Romanian migrant agricultural workers in Western Europe, motivated by money rather than patriotism or heroism. Asserting that Romanian soldiers bribe their superiors to gain lucrative billets in Afghanistan or Iraq, Popescu opined that if overseas military service is heroism "then all Romanians who left the country to go and pick strawberries...are Romanian heroes." It is worth noting that although Popescu is arguably the best-known journalist in Romania, many reader reactions on the daily's website criticized Popescu's column as inappropriate and insensitive.

18. (C) Comment. Although Hancu's death marked the first Romanian combat fatality in Iraq, Romania has suffered three fatalities in Afghanistan since 2003 and a Romanian soldier committed suicide in Iraq earlier this year. None of these events apparently shook Romania's resolve in the global war on terror. Journalist Popescu's angry (and inapt) comparison to Hancu as a "strawberry picker" does not represent a mainstream point of view, either by the general public or political leaders. Romania's military remains among the nation's most respected institutions and organized opposition to Romania's commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan is minuscule.

For most Romanian leaders, including Senate Defense Committee President Maior, Romania's strategic relationship with the U.S. is and should remain a central pillar of Romanian foreign policy. Basescu's description of Hancu as "among the ranks of Romania's heroes" probably comes closest to capturing how the majority of Romanian citizens perceive Hancu's death. End Comment.

19. (U) AmEmbassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams are available on the Bucharest SIPRNet website:  
[www.state.gov.gov/eur/Bucharest](http://www.state.gov.gov/eur/Bucharest)

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